

Jerry's Kids

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Brightman Carol. *Sweet Chaos : The Grateful Dead's American Adventure*. First ed. Clarkson Potter 1998.

MY brother was a Marine Corps staff sergeant, my mother's favorite family activity has always been a visit to the shrine of St. Jude, and my father is a Yankee fan -- so I've had some exposure to cults. From reading Willa Appel's "Cults in America" a few years ago, I understand that mystery and contradiction frequently pervade the personalities or the phenomena around which cults flourish. Still, I've never entirely fathomed Deadheads.

Why, three decades after the Grateful Dead helped create the psychedelic San Francisco sound that seemed to capture the blissed-out optimism of the mid-1960's counterculture, would mushrooming hordes of fans grow ever more devoted to this particular group of rock musicians -- as opposed to, say, NRBQ, the Band or the Meters? Could much of the ritual obsession with the Dead stem from a cult of personality fixed upon the band's leader, Jerry Garcia, even if, for many of the years before his death from drug abuse in 1995 at the age of 53, he did not display any discernible personality? Can outsiders ever fully appreciate the band's insular esthetic? I mean, I respect that the group would play for three hours straight, but so would my 4-year-old son. What does the Dead world's accumulation of quantity -- hundreds of thousands of fans gathering year after year, collecting innumerable cassette tapes of the same songs -- come to quantify?

Several books published since the early 1980's, after the Grateful Dead's following took form as a phenomenon, have dealt with the group as pop stars and gossip fodder, touching on some larger issues while generally emphasizing the members' embrace of free love and expensive drugs. (Among them, Robert Greenfield's oral-history biography of Garcia, "Dark Star," and Sandy Troy's "One More Saturday Night: Reflections With the Grateful Dead, the Dead Family and Dead Heads" tackle their subjects most intelligently.) The pop-culture scholars have gone to the opposite extreme with essentially impenetrable academic studies like Anthony Pearson's paper "The Grateful Dead Phenomenon: An Ethnomethodological Approach." Carol Brightman, the author of "Writing Dangerously: Mary McCarthy and Her World," claims the treacherous middle ground, aiming to present a readable, serious exploration of the band and its role as a social force, in "Sweet Chaos: The Grateful Dead's American Adventure." She seems to have come to her subject with the same curiosity that I and presumably others who are not tripping on LSD have about the colorful social system that she calls the "culture" of the Dead.

Originally an old-timey music group called Mother McCree's Uptown Jug Champions, reformed as a bar band and retitled the Warlocks, the group that became the Grateful Dead -- Garcia's preferred name was the Mythical Ethical Icicle Tricycle -- was never a hit recording act like the Byrds or the Jefferson Airplane until its final years. From the start, accordingly, Deadheads (so named for their metaphorically druggish addiction to the group), like all fans of the less famous, have been the most dedicated. By the 80's and early 90's, America's turn to the right further isolated the Dead, with its Haight-Ashbury ethic -- ironically boosting the group's nostalgia appeal and increasing the secret-society allure of its fan base. Aging and out of sync with the times, the Grateful Dead became a

touring sensation, selling out every concert to a worshipful audience of old hippies, their adult children and grandchildren and young tie-dyed newcomers, whose growing numbers seemed to be unloading from a refurbished Magic Bus.

As a band, the Dead was always unpredictable, a loose ensemble of adroit musicians who reveled in interplay and improvisation. Brightman's book is written much like a Grateful Dead set, for better and for worse. It is episodically constructed, with unexpected shifts in focus and tone; there are digressions, some muddy spots and awkward moments of repetition, occasional pretense -- then a flash of inspiration or beauty. Audiences used to talk about waiting out the band's confused stages for the high points to come, and readers of "Sweet Chaos" may find themselves doing the same.

The book has a patchwork quality, as if it had been written in short segments and ordered in the end like collage. It does not follow strict chronology, which is fine; more problematic, many details about individuals or events appear long after they would have been most useful. Strangest of all are Brightman's digressive passages, some personal, which she fails adequately to relate to the principal subjects of this book -- for example, sections on her experiences in Cuba and in Vietnam, and with the Weathermen, the White Panthers and other radical groups. (The Dead was firmly apolitical and not involved in any of the radical activities Brightman details.) Perhaps like Garcia, who came to prefer playing bluegrass with his own bands to performing with the Dead, Brightman secretly wanted to write a different book, one about her own (fascinating, actually) history in radicalism.

Musically, Brightman sometime stumbles as obviously as Bob Weir during his apprenticeship as the Dead's rhythm guitarist. Weir's problem, incidentally, was staying in key, not in tune, as Brightman says. The band's bassist, Phil Lesh, composed atonal symphonies for orchestras, not symphonies for atonal orchestras. And Bob Dylan did not perform with the Band at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival.

In one of her high points, Brightman deserves some literary bravery medal for her nearly radical account of LSD. Not quite glorifying or demonizing the drug, she vividly evokes the atmosphere of spiritual adventurism (however dangerous, naive or misplaced) that led the members of the Dead, those within their sphere of influence and so many others of their time to chemical experimentation. Indeed, the trip is a recurring theme of "Sweet Chaos": the trip on drugs -- first LSD, then for some (like Garcia, who died of it), heroin -- that often seemed inseparable from the Dead's expansive, mercurial music; the literal trip from gig to gig that defined the band members' daily lives; and the musical trip, the high of performing -- "the pow . . . definitely a rush," said Garcia, who evidently got his trips mixed up. Brightman quotes Garcia as saying that he thought reality was an illusion. Too bad Garcia -- and, perhaps, much of the sedated community that indulged his meanderings -- apparently thought illusion was reality, too.

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